

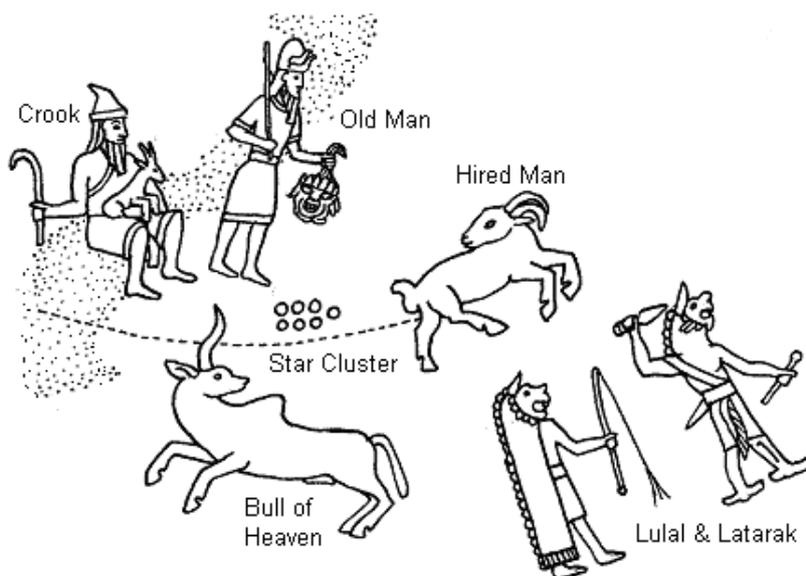
It is now well known that the constellations of the Zodiac originated in the ancient land of Babylonia (modern day Iraq). Yet, despite more than a century and a half of scholarship, very little information on this subject has been made accessible to the non-specialist. We are very grateful to Gavin White for allowing us to reproduce excerpts of his recently published [Babylonian Star-lore](#). Over the forthcoming months these articles will help to address this deficiency by presenting the lore and symbolism of the twelve Babylonian Zodiac constellations.

The excerpts reproduced on this site are taken, with the author's permission, from the recently published book '[Babylonian Star-lore](#)' by Gavin White.

THE SPRING EQUINOX PERIOD (Pages 27-9)

By the time of the spring equinox, light has triumphed over darkness as the days now start to outlast the nights and as such it is a time when new life is celebrated and any lingering influences of the winter are banished. In the fields and cattle-folds, the spring is celebrated as the time of nature's abundance when a majority of animals bear their young, the harvest is brought in and all nature springs into life.

The new moon closest to the spring equinox marks the start of the calendrical New Year. And befitting this sacred juncture it is the season most closely associated with the king, who is now inaugurated and empowered by the gods to rule for another term.



The constellations rising around the time of the spring equinox



Contrary to its name, the Hired Man was represented in the heavens by the familiar ram or lamb of *Aries*. As a seasonal symbol the lamb reflects the fact that a majority of newborn lambs, kids and calves appear in the cattle-fold in the springtime. On the other hand, the name of the Hired Man refers to the hired labour used to bring in the springtime barley harvest. The lore of the constellation has been purposefully contrived to reflect the concerns of both barley farmers and cattle-herders. The symbolic meaning of the lamb is best preserved in Greek tradition where it appears as the horned lamb with a golden fleece, possession of which conferred kingship. Its radiant fleece clearly points to the solar nature of the lamb, which like the similar symbols of the bull-calf and goat-kid represents the newborn sun springing into manifestation.



The constellation of the Crook depicts a shepherd tending his flocks. Beyond the obvious pastoral symbolism of the herders, the shepherd also functions as one of the primary symbols of the king, who guides his people and nation as a shepherd guides his flocks.

As a symbol, the shepherd's crook naturally represents the king's regalia and his divinely ordained power to rule. It is therefore fitting that the celestial Crook rises in the first month of the year when the king was inaugurated and empowered by the gods. The figure of the shepherd-king is naturally associated with Dumuzi, who is now grown to be a young man and is about to marry the goddess in the rite of the Sacred Marriage. By this union the king, who was identified with Dumuzi, established his right to rule and further guaranteed the fertility of his realm.



The Bull of Heaven is probably the oldest exemplar of the theme of the shepherd and his flocks, which is so strongly represented in the springtime skies. As a basic celestial symbol cattle seem to represent all the fertile powers of the springtime skies – world mythology frequently relates the images of bulls, cows and calves to a whole range of heavenly phenomena including rain-clouds, rays of sunlight and the newborn sun.

More specifically, the Sumerian Bull of Heaven is described as a destructive beast, which came down from heaven to drink the rivers dry and to parch the land. These seasonal attributes are no doubt derived from the fact that the Bull of Heaven rises late in the 2nd month of the year when the temperature starts to rise and the rains diminish.



The final group of springtime constellations have a strong calendrical significance, as they seem to be purposefully located at the juncture of the old and new years. At this time of natural abundance, the earth was thought to 'open up' in order to yield her bounty, but to the archaic mind this opening up was accompanied by a host of dangers, chief of which was the potential pollution from the dead who could gain easy access to the upper worlds at this pivotal time. In light of this belief, I would suggest that the Old Man, with his wand and prophylactic head, is banishing the ghosts of the old year and driving them back to the underworld.

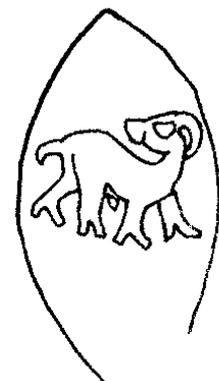


A similar set of ideas probably informs the lion-headed demons known as Lulal and Latarak. Like many ferocious 'demonic' beings, their influence could be utilised to exorcise any type of evil or malignant force. In the main body of the book I suggest that they act as guardians of the year – banishing any lingering influence of the closing year and purifying the start of the new calendrical cycle.

THE HIRED MAN (Pages 127-131)

It is well known that the stars of *Aries* were referred to as the Hired Man in Babylonian tradition. In the past, this has led many researchers to conclude that these stars must be envisioned as some sort of farm labourer and that the ram figure of *Aries* was introduced into the zodiac from sources outside Mesopotamia. But contrary to expectations the 'Hired Man' is, in fact, the Babylonian name for the ram of *Aries*. To understand this conundrum, his name has got to be considered in two distinct manners.

At face value, the Hired Man represents the 'hireling', an agricultural worker employed to bring in the springtime barley harvest. But with a little scholarly latitude, the name can also be understood as the 'sheep of appeasement'. The two-fold significance of the Hired Man relies on the identity of man and sheep, which is neatly expressed in the cuneiform writing system where the two different signs used to write 'man' and 'sheep', can both be pronounced as "lu". This pun appears to be entirely purposeful, as it expresses the dual nature of the constellation – to signify



76 A ram from a late Uruk seal

the barley harvester and the first-born lamb of spring (a similar duality of farming and herding symbolism is also found in the lore surrounding the Bull of Heaven).

The newborn lamb, like the goat-kid and calf, symbolises the rebirth of life that occurs in the spring. More specifically, it makes an analogy between the emergence of the lamb from the waters of the ewe's womb and the springtime rebirth of the sun from the cosmic waters of the wintertime skies.

In Sumerian the Hired Man is written 'Mul Lu-Hun-ga'			
			
MUL	LU ₂	HUN	GA ₂
Taken together these signs are read in Akkadian as <i>agru</i> – the 'hired man or hireling'.			
<p>The Lu-sign is a stylised figure of a man; it is commonly used before a person's name to convey the idea of a 'profession'. In this sense it signifies a 'freeman or professional' as opposed to a bondman.</p> <p>The Sumerian compound Hun-ga can be read in Akkadian as <i>agāru</i> – 'to hire or rent' something or someone. So the name as a whole can be translated as the 'Hired Man'.</p> <p>But as the spoken word "lu" can also signify a sheep, and the Hun-ga compound can be used to write the Akkadian verbs – 'to rest or be still', 'to appease or placate', and 'to lift or carry away' – the name can also be interpreted as something like 'the sheep of appeasement or placation'.</p>			

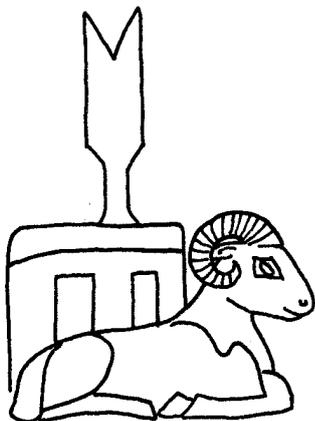
That the Hired Man was imagined as a ram is made explicit in a handful of later texts where his name is simply written as 'the Ram':

In some late texts <i>Aries</i> is known as the Ram, written 'Mul Udu-Nita'		
		
MUL	UDU	NITA ₂
Sheep in general and rams in particular are called <i>immeru</i> in Akkadian.		
<p>The Udu-sign represents a sheep even if the sign itself bears no obvious relationship to a sheep. This sign occurs in the planetary name 'the wild sheep' (Udu-Idim), which specifically refers to the planets Mars, Saturn and Mercury. Its use in astronomic lore is almost certainly due to the symbolism of the quartered circle, which, among other things, can be thought of as an image of the year divided by the solstices and equinoxes. The sign can also be read as "lu", as for example in Lu-lim, the Stag.</p> <p>Originally the Nita-sign depicted a phallus – its basic meaning is 'male, virile or manly'.</p>		

Although *Aries* is famous in modern astrology for being the first sign of the zodiac, it does not hold this position in mainstream Babylonian tradition. On the contrary, the 'leader of the celestial hosts' in Babylonian star-lore is consistently regarded as the Star Cluster, our *Pleiades*. In star-lists from the Old Babylonian period to the '*Stars on the path of the Moon*' found in *Mul-Apin*, the Star Cluster is placed at the head of the list while the Hired Man is more often than not relegated to the

final position. Inevitably the question arises – when did the Hired Man become the lead star of heaven?

The earliest conclusive textual evidence is found in *Mul-Apin* where the Hired Man is said to rise on the 1st day of the 1st month. Although *Mul-Apin* is thought to have been composed between 1200 and 1000 BCE, the earliest copy only dates to 687 BCE, and any section could easily have been updated prior to this terminal point. So at best this reference only proves that the Hired Man had assumed the role of ‘lead star of heaven’ by the 7th century BCE. To explore the possibility of an earlier date we need to examine the pictorial evidence found on entitlement stones.



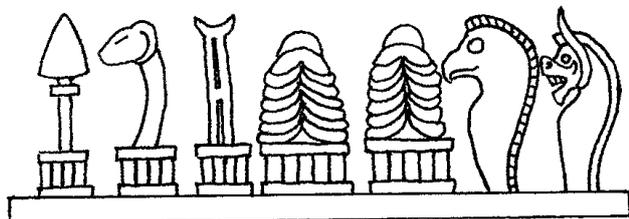
77 The ram from a 12th century entitlement stone

Around the 12th century BCE, depictions of a sitting or running ram make their first appearance on entitlement stones. The most interesting example occurs on a stone dated to the 12th century, on which a ram is placed before a shrine topped with a symbol shaped like the flights of an arrow (*left*). This symbol doesn't occur on any other published depictions of entitlement stones but on graphic grounds alone, it bears a telling resemblance to the cuneiform sign known as **Amar** (*right*), which depicts the face of a calf, but can be used to signify the young offspring of other animals. I believe that it may be a prototype for the modern glyph of *Aries*, which of course represents the face of the ram.



The Amar-sign

The earliest evidence for the celestial ram can be found shortly after 1600 BCE when the first depictions of the Ram-headed staff appear on entitlement stones. That it is a symbol of some importance is confirmed by its appearance in groups of standards representing the high-ranking gods of astrology (*fig 78*). This symbol, probably called the *mum*-symbol, is later commonly combined with the Goatfish (*see fig 69*) and the turtle – the three symbols are therefore very likely



78 The Ram-headed staff (second from the left) among deity symbols from a 9th or 10th century BCE entitlement stone

to represent *Aries*, *Capricorn* and *Cancer*, which is astronomically significant as these three constellations respectively mark the spring equinox and the two solstices.

Taken as a whole the pictorial evidence from entitlement stones shows that the ram and ram-headed staff were regarded as high-ranking symbols from approximately 1600 BCE (which is roughly the date that entitlement stones first appear in the archaeological record). These early depictions certainly suggest that the ram had taken its place as the

lead star of heaven by the middle of the 2nd millennium. Unfortunately it isn't possible to trace the history of the celestial ram any further than this point as the archaeological and literate sources fall silent.

Elsewhere I have suggested that the Hired Man assumed its role as herald of the spring equinox and the New Year in the mid 3rd millennium (*see the Crook*).

The regent of the Hired Man is the shepherding god Dumuzi – ‘the true child’ or ‘rightful son’. He is one of the earliest and most popular gods known in Mesopotamia, where he is thought of as the ‘spirit of life’ that is manifest in all aspects of nature. He appears in numerous guises, as a god of shepherds, cattle-herders, farmers, orchard men, fishermen and fowlers. Among the shepherds he promotes the abundance of the cattle-fold and its dairy produce, and in this aspect his mother is said to be Duttur, the personified ewe.

The myths surrounding Dumuzi largely concern his springtime courtship with Inanna, which culminated in the ceremony of the Sacred Marriage. In this rite, the deified king who was identified with Dumuzi either married the goddess or a priestess representing her. The fertility and fecundity of all nature was promoted by this sacred act of union. Although the last deified king died in the

17th century BCE, the practice may well have continued in a modified form as a marriage between Marduk and Šarpanitu was celebrated as part of the New Year festivities in latter day Babylon.

Even though Dumuzi represents the spirit of life, it is his fate to die. As summer grips the land, the rains cease, vegetation dies back and the abundance of springtime wanes. Dumuzi has foreboding dreams of his impending death and asks all nature to mourn for him. Although he tries to escape his fate, calling upon the sun god to save him, such efforts are ultimately futile, as he is 'doomed to death'.

At the height of summer the demons of the underworld search him out, bind him and carry him off to the land of the dead. Some variants of the myth describe how he escaped the demons by diving into a river, but even this ruse failed as the river carried him down to the underworld.

But the spirit of life is irrepressible and will ultimately triumph over death. Like the sun god, his patron and protector, Dumuzi returns to the land of the living with the turning of the year. In the form of Damu, 'the Child', he escapes from the underworld and the whole cycle starts all over again (see the Swine).

Other astrology texts attribute the Hired Man to a primeval god called Kingu. Like Dumuzi, he can be understood as another dying god, whose death ultimately brings life. Kingu appears in the *Epic of Creation*, where he is the battle-leader of the monstrous hosts that fought against the gods. After the gods attained victory, they executed Kingu, and created mankind from his collected blood.

In astrology, the appearance of the Hired Man is used to predict the fate of the kings of the Four regions: 'If the Hired Man is faint: the king of Subartu will see misery'. Similarly 'if the Hired Man is black: the king of the Westland (Amurru) will fall in battle'. Both these omens are considered to be auspicious to the Akkadian king as they heaped woe upon his enemies. The Hired Man's association to kings is probably based on the fact that his star rises in month 1, which is closely associated with the rites of kingship.

Surprisingly these two omens are the only examples to mention the Hired Man directly, but like many other ecliptic constellations his star can be called by a number of other names. The commonest of these alternative names is the 'Field-constellation', which properly speaking refers to the four stars that make up the *Square of Pegasus*. The underlying identity between the two constellations is founded on the common theme of barley cultivation (for the same reason 'the Field' can also be used to refer to the constellation of the Furrow, our *Virgo*).

The identification of the Field with the Hired Man is made explicit in the *State Archives*: 'If the moon is surrounded by a halo and the Field, behind which is the Star Cluster, stands in it: the cattle of the land will prosper' – the Field, behind which is the Star Cluster is the Hired Man. A quick look at the star map shows that the Hired Man rather than the Field is adjacent to the Star Cluster. The prediction concerning cattle is, of course, very appropriate to the ram's image applied to the Hired Man.

This identification throws considerable light on the *Astrolabes* where the 'Field star' is said to rise in the first month of the year, which is true for the Hired Man but not for the constellation of the Field (ie *the Square of Pegasus*) that actually rises at the beginning of month 11, some 55 days earlier.

Similarly, the description of the 'Field' found in the earliest versions of the *Astrolabes* is also more suited to the Hired Man: 'The Field that stands at the rising of the east wind, it lies across the south wind. This star is the star of the New Year, the lead star of the stars of Ea. For taking a wife'. The identification is now certain, as the Hired Man can indeed, be utilised in magical practice 'to get a wife, to arrange a marriage' – no doubt in memory of the Sacred Marriage celebrated between Dumuzi and Inanna in the springtime.

But this isn't the end of the matter, as the Hired Man can also be identified with the Crook-star, which was envisioned in the heavens as a goat-kid tended by a shepherd. In the section on the Crook I argue that this goat-kid is really a 'pre-Arian' version of the ram that was probably the 'lead star of heaven' in the late 3rd millennium. This convention of using alternative names goes some way to explain why so little lore concerning the Hired Man is apparent in Babylonian astrology.

See also: the Crook, the Field, the Cattle Pen, Appendix 16 and fig 69



79 A ram from an entitlement stone